

The Influence of Aggressiveness on Rape-Myth Acceptance among University Students

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The detrimental effects of rape are well established. In order to support victims of rape in reporting sexual assault, the factors which predict rape myths need to be investigated. Aggression has been linked to sexual violence, but little is known about the role of aggressive behaviour in rape-myth acceptance. The present study aimed to investigate whether rape myths could be predicted by verbal aggression, physical aggression, hostility, anger or sex in a sample of 121 participants. A regression analysis found that an individual's sex and self-reported physical aggression significantly predicted rape-myth acceptance.

Keywords: aggression; rape attitudes; rape-myth acceptance; sex.

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Introduction

Rape is a widespread phenomenon occurring internationally and across cultures (Grubb & Turner, 2012). Approximately 85,000 women are raped on average in England and Wales every year, with over 400,000 women being sexually assaulted (Office for National Statistics Bulletin, 2013). This demonstrates that rape is a pervasive issue in modern society (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Alarming as these figures are, it is surprising that rape and sexual assaults are the most under-reported crimes in the United Kingdom (Grubb & Turner, 2012), rendering the above figures an inaccurate representation of the issue. This may be due to the stigmas attached to victims of rape, attitudes towards the crime itself and the existence of rape myths which can affect the way in which society perceives rape. The negative consequences of rape have led to empirical research into its causes and consequences (Kolivas & Gross, 2007).

Rape Myths

Individuals are more likely to commit a sexual offence if they endorse rape myths (Bohner et al., 1998; Koss & Dinero, 1988). In addition, convicted and self-confessed rapists display higher levels of rape-myth acceptance compared to non-rapists (Field, 1978; Koralewski & Conger, 1992). These myths are defined as 'attitudes and beliefs that are generally false but are widely and persistently held, and that serve to deny and justify male sexual aggression against women' (Lonsway & Fitzgerald, 1994, p. 134). Evidence suggests that those who endorse sexually aggressive behaviours are likely to respond less empathically,

be less supportive of rape victims and engage in victim-blaming behaviour which causes victims to feel embarrassed about their ordeal and thus not report the crime committed against them (Flood & Pease, 2009; Stahl, Eek, & Kazemi, 2010). Some victims may believe they are to blame and may not have a support system if they report victimisation (Flood & Pease, 2009). Dispelling rape myths and their accompanying attitudes and beliefs may increase empathy towards victims, which may in turn provide victims with the confidence to report rape and sexual assault. Therefore, it is important to investigate the predictors of rape-myth acceptance.

Males report higher rape-myth acceptance compared to females (for a meta-analysis, see Suarez & Gadalla, 2010). Because rape is a sexual offence it is often presumed that motivations of rape are purely sexual, implying that the offender is sexually frustrated (Groth, 1979). However, studies suggest that most rapists have sexual partners and are sexually active at the time of their offence (Scully, 1990). Rape satisfies the non-sexual needs of the offender and is a way of expressing and maintaining power, control and dominance (Ellis 1989; Groth, 1979). In addition, some rapists are unable to have an erection or ejaculate during rape (Groth, 1979), which further supports this proposition. A common myth is that women provoke rape by the way in which they dress and/or act (Reddington & Kreisel, 2005). This myth implies that the victim is to blame for the crime and assumes that those who dress provocatively are 'looking for sex'. The above misconception is relevant because it challenges this rape myth and its victim-blaming mentality.

A common theme in rape myths is that they minimise the victim's injury by blaming the victim for the occurrence of the act (Carmody & Washington, 2001; Schwartz & Leggett, 1999). The attribution of blame in rape cases include the victim's respectability (Luginbuhl & Mullin, 1981), perceived physical attractiveness (Tieger, 1981), provocativeness (Scroggs, 1976), previous sexual activity (L'Armand & Pepitone, 1982), amount of resistance to the attack (Van Wie, Gross, & Marx, 1995), intoxication levels (Richardson & Campbell, 1982) and manner of dress at the time of the attack (Edmonds & Cahoon, 1986). The psychological consequences after being raped include depression, revenge fantasies, post-traumatic stress disorder, sexual dysfunction and confusion about sexual identity (Walker, Archer, & Davies, 2005). This demonstrates the need to investigate the factors which can challenge rape myths and support victims of rape.

The Role of Aggression

Previous research has investigated the impact that violent and aggressive behaviour has on attitudes towards rape. Evidence suggests that those who engage in sexually aggressive behaviours report high levels of general aggressiveness (Gidycz, Warkentin, & Orchowski, 2007; Lalumiere, Harris, Quinsey, & Rice, 2005; Wilson, Mouilso, Gentile, Calhoun, & Zeichner, 2015). As a result, aggressiveness may influence rape-myth acceptance.

Beck, Boys, Rose, and Beck (2012) investigated the influence of the level of violence, aggressive behaviour and sexual objectification shown towards women in videogames. The results indicated that male participants who play such games report a significant increase

in rape-myth acceptance. Nunes, Hermann, and Ratcliffe (2013) investigated the relationship between sexual aggression and implicit/explicit attitudes towards rape. Their results showed significant group differences between sexually aggressive and non-aggressive participants. The most sexually aggressive participants showed more positive implicit and explicit attitudes towards rape. There appears to be a lack of research into the role of aggressive tendencies and attitudes towards rape-myth acceptance.

The Role of Sex

Sex and rape-myth acceptance has been researched extensively. White and Kurpius (1999) found that men have higher levels of rape-myth acceptance compared to women. Research has shown that males are most likely to commit a sexual assault during their time at university, which is a rationale for conducting such a study using a university sample (Holcomb, Holcomb, Sondag, & Williams, 1988). In addition, sexual assault rates for women studying at university are three times greater than women in the general public (Koss & Gidycz, 1985). This risk may be exacerbated by factors such as alcohol use, greater sexual expectation and the perceived availability of attractive partners (Burgess, 2007). In Malamuth (1981), 35% of the male university students surveyed disclosed that there was a chance they would commit a sexual assault if they were sure they would not be caught or punished.

The Current Study

This study aimed to investigate rape-myth acceptance among university students. This

research aimed to determine if sex, verbal aggression, physical aggression, hostility and anger significantly predict rape-myth acceptance. The study had two hypotheses:

Hypothesis 1: Sex, physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility significantly influence rape-myth acceptance.

Hypothesis 2: The male participants would exhibit significantly higher levels of rape-myth acceptance than the female participants.

Method

Participants and Design

A total of 121 undergraduate students from Coventry University took part. The sample included 56 males and 65 females (mean age $M = 19$ years, $SD = 0.98$). Psychology students were awarded research credits as part of the department's research participation scheme. Of the sample, 30% was Black British, 37% was White British, 27% was Asian British and 5% did not disclose their ethnicity. This study adopted a correlational design. The predictor variables were physical aggression, verbal aggression, hostility, anger, and sex. The outcome variable was rape-myth acceptance.

Materials and Procedure

Participants completed the Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale (Payne, Lonsway, & Fitzgerald, 1999) and Buss and Perry's (1992) aggression scale. The Illinois Rape Myth Acceptance Scale includes four sub-scales. Participants were asked to rate 22 statements

on a 1 to 5 Likert scale. This scale has been found to be reliable and robust (Payne et al., 1999). Previous studies that have also used this measure have found that it has sufficient internal consistency, reliability and construct validity (see Baugher, Elhai, Monroe, & Gray, 2010; Paul, Gray, Elhai, & Davis, 2009). The scale was found to be reliable in this study ($\alpha = .73$).

The Buss Perry scale used to measure aggression. Participants were asked to rate 29 statements on a 1 to 7 Likert scale. This scale identifies levels of physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility. The scale has been found to have moderate to high internal consistency and the four aggression scales were positively related to other measures of aggression (Harris, 1997). This scale has good internal consistency, discriminant validity, convergent validity and test-retest reliability (Valdivia-Peralta, Fonseca-Pedrero, Gonzalez-Bravo, & Lemos-Giraldez, 2014). This study was approved by the host university's behavioural ethics committee. Reliability was found to be good for each subscale in the present study: physical aggression ($\alpha = .72$), verbal aggression ($\alpha = .78$), anger ($\alpha = .80$) and hostility ($\alpha = .70$).

Results

Hypothesis 1: Sex, physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility significantly influence rape-myth acceptance.

Multiple regression was conducted to measure the impact of sex (male/female), physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility on rape-myth acceptance.

Table 1. Correlation coefficients between all variables including descriptive statistics.

	1.RMA	2.PA	3.VA	4. Anger	5. Hostility
	(<i>M</i> = 45.9, <i>SD</i> = 14.35)	(<i>M</i> = 29, <i>SD</i> = 7.53)	(<i>M</i> = 18.89, <i>SD</i> = 5.94)	(<i>M</i> = 22.1, <i>SD</i> = 5.51)	(<i>M</i> = 27.1, <i>SD</i> = 10.3)
1. RMA	---				
2. PA	<i>r</i> = .30**	---			
3. VA	<i>r</i> = .11	<i>r</i> = -.25*	-----		
4. Anger	<i>r</i> = .10	<i>r</i> = .19	<i>r</i> = .21*	-----	
5. Hostility	<i>r</i> = .16	<i>r</i> = .29*	<i>r</i> = .21*	<i>r</i> = .24*	-----

**p* < .05,

***p* < .01

Preliminary analyses were conducted to ensure that there was no violation of the assumptions of normality, linearity, multicollinearity and homoscedasticity. Variables were converted to z-scores in order to provide standardised regression values (Table 2). The total variance explained by the model as a whole was 16%, $F(5, 115) = 4.36, p < .001$.

Table 2. Summary of standardized regression variables.

Predictor variables	β	p	95% CI (Standardized)	
			Lower Bound	Upper Bound
<i>Sex</i>	-.26*	.04**	-.87	-.72
<i>Physical Aggression</i>	.23*	.03*	.02	.43
<i>Verbal Aggression</i>	.002	.98	-.19	.19
<i>Anger</i>	-.03	.80	-.25	.20
<i>Hostility</i>	.08	.47	-.13	.28

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$

Hypothesis 2: The male participants would exhibit significantly higher levels of rape- myth acceptance than the female participants.

A one-way between-group analysis of variance (ANOVA) was conducted to explore sex differences in rape-myth acceptance, physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility. There were significant sex differences in rape-myth acceptance, $F(1, 119) = 12.95$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 .098$, with males displaying higher rape-myth acceptance ($M = 50.75$, $SD = 15.05$) than females ($M = 41.78$, $SD = 12.39$). A sex difference was also found in physical aggression, $F(1, 119) = 4.99$, $p < .05$, $\eta^2 .04$, with males displaying higher levels of self-reported physical aggression ($M = 30.58$, $SD = 6.68$) than females ($M = 27.56$, $SD = 7.98$).

Discussion

The aims of the current study were to explore rape-myth acceptance amongst university students and to investigate the influence of sex, physical aggression, verbal aggression, anger and hostility on rape-myth acceptance. Sex and physical aggression significantly influenced rape-myth acceptance. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was partially supported. Hypothesis 2 was fully supported, as males held higher rates of rape-myth acceptance than females.

Males were found to report significantly higher rape-myth acceptance and higher levels of physical aggression compared to females. Furthermore, physical aggression and sex were the only significant predictors of rape-myth acceptance. This finding is consistent with previous research investigating the effect of sex on rape myths (Suarez & Gadalla, 2010; White & Kurpius, 1999).

An explanation for the sex difference found in rape-myth acceptance and physical aggression may relate to socialisation and exposure to physically aggressive content towards women in the media. For example, research suggests that playing videogames that show violence against women increases rape myths among male participants (Beck et al., 2012; Nunes et al., 2013). Exposure to violent, aggressive stimuli directed towards women may increase rape-myth acceptance in men. The same relationship has been echoed in research conducted by Nunes et al. (2013), who found that the most aggressive participants had more positive attitudes towards rape. Ellis (1989) argued that individuals are taught

gender-appropriate behaviour through a socialisation process, built on social learning theory. This occurs through frequent and repeated displays of violence and aggressiveness towards women in the mass media, society and family environment. This exposure leads to tolerance which causes violent acts against women to be undermined and may also relate to the underreporting of rape by victims (Ellis, 1989).

Pornography may also partially explain our finding. Although this paper does not explore pornographic use, it may be that men report higher physical aggression and acceptance of rape myths due to the manner in which women are portrayed in pornography (Wright & Randall, 2012), such as pornography with a bondage and discipline, dominance and submission, sadism and masochism (BDSM) theme. Violent pornography typically depicts men displaying sexual, physical and verbal aggression towards women (Fisher & Barak, 1991; Zillmann & Bryant, 1988). These scenes usually depict the male in a

strong dominant position with the female in a submissive role in which she experiences sexual pleasure despite being in a humiliating position (Linz, Donnerstein, & Penrod, 1987). Physical aggression is highly prevalent in pornographic scenes, which could be a potential explanation as to why physical aggression influences rape-myth acceptance, and why men exhibit higher levels of physical aggression and rape-myth acceptance compared to women. Research needs to be conducted to investigate pornography use and aggression, as this would have implications for policy (Seto & Barbaree, 1995).

This study has several limitations. Firstly, due to the sensitivity of the topic area,

participants may have answered the questions with the aim of appearing socially desirable (Maxfield & Babbie, 2008). This limitation was addressed by collecting data online and anonymously. In addition, although there are issues with self-report data, evidence has suggested that anti-social behaviour can be accurately assessed with self-report measures (Woods, Hermann, Nunes, McPhail, & Sewell, 2011). Secondly, the sample size is small and cultural attitudes are not taken into account. Thirdly, due to the correlational design of the study, causality cannot be established.

Conclusion

This study provides a modest step in supporting the association between physical aggressiveness and rape-myth acceptance. Identifying and understanding variables that influence the level of rape-myth acceptance amongst university students is important. Changing and/or eradicating rape myths may lead to individuals being less likely to engage in and be accepting of sexually aggressive behaviour (Lanier, 2001). This may in turn lead to victims being more willing to report sexual crimes. This study furthers our understanding of the factors which predict rape-myth acceptance and adds to the limited research conducted on the correlation between aggression and rape-myth acceptance.

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